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Officials laud USDA project during trip

By Amy Bickel

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abickel@hutchnews.com

ELLSWORTH - The grocery store in this small central Kansas town outgrew its brick and mortar.

One of the only markets in Ellsworth County, population 6,500, the owners wanted to expand the local grocery. But landlocked just off the main street in downtown Ellsworth, there wasn't room to grow - or the money to consider it.

Today, however, the 21,000-square-foot store sits just north of town in a new building that opened May 3. Profits have increased by 35 percent, and General Manager Ray Gembala expects the upward trend to continue.

The expansion became possible through a zero-interest U.S. Department of Agriculture Rural Development loan.

"It wouldn't have happened," Gembala told a group of dignitaries, among them Rep. Jerry Moran, R-Kan., and Rural Development Undersecretary Thomas Dorr. "The seed money from the USDA was what put us in position to do this project."

Moran and Dorr visited parts of Kansas on Wednesday to spotlight the government program that funds everything from fire trucks and community centers to libraries and health clinics.

The pair stopped in Holcomb before traveling to Ellsworth, where they toured the market and Ellsworth County Medical Center. The tour ends today in Topeka.

Moran said prosperity in small communities often is dependant on whether or not they have a hospital, grocery store or pharmacy.

"I often tell my colleagues ... whether there is a grocery store in town really is whether or not it's a growing community," Moran said, adding his district total of 75 hospitals is more than any other congressional district in the nation.

The program is working to save rural America, state director Chuck Banks said. During fiscal 2005, USDA Rural Development provided \$235 million to Kansas' rural communities, creating more than 1,000 jobs.

Ellsworth's grocery expansion, for instance, created 10 new jobs, Banks said. The grocery received \$450,000 in aid, administered through Rolling Hills Electric Cooperative, toward the \$1.4 million project.

Also, a loan seven years ago to Ellsworth's Maico Industries brought 100 welding jobs to town, said Loren Medley, business development coordinator with Kansas Electric Power Cooperative. Other USDA Rural Development projects administered by electric cooperatives include a Reno County swine complex, renovation of Ellsworth County's Wilson Hotel and construction of Cimarron Dairy in Gray County.

Nationally, the agency provided \$18 billion in funding last year, Undersecretary Dorr said, doubling its 2001 total.

Dorr said the increase reflected the view that there is a need to invest in rural America.

USDA Rural Development provided \$1 million toward the \$1.3 million Ellsworth health care project, said Roger Pearson, hospital administrator. Built in 2004, the 11,000-square-foot facility houses six providers, including three physicians.

Pearson said without quality clinics, it becomes harder to attract physicians to small-town Kansas.

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